

Remarks at Laborfest in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

September 6, 2010

The President. Hello, Milwaukee! Oh, hello, Milwaukee. Thank you. It is good to be back in Milwaukee. It is good to be—I'm almost home. I just hop on the 94 and I'm home. Take it all the way to the south side.

It is good to be here on such a beautiful day. Happy Labor Day, everybody. I want to say thank you to the Milwaukee Area Labor Council and all of my brothers and sisters in the AFL–CIO for inviting me to spend this day with you, a day that belongs to the working men and women of America.

I want to acknowledge your outstanding national president, a man who knows that a strong economy needs a strong labor movement, Rich Trumka. Thank you to the president of Wisconsin AFL–CIO, Dave Newby; our host, your area labor council secretary-treasurer, Sheila Cochran. I hear it's Sheila's birthday tomorrow. Where is she? Happy birthday, Sheila.

I'm proud to be here with our Secretary of Labor, a daughter of union members, Hilda Solis. And our Secretary of Transportation, Ray LaHood, is in the house. And I want everybody to give it up for people who are at the forefront of every fight for Wisconsin's working men and women: Senator Herb Kohl; Congresswoman Gwen Moore. Your outstanding mayor and I believe soon to be outstanding Governor, Tom Barrett's in the house. And I know your other great Senator, Russ Feingold, was here earlier standing with you and your families, just like he always has. Now he's in his hometown of Janesville to participate in their Labor Day parade.

So it is good to be back. Now, of course, this isn't my first time at Laborfest. Some of you remember, I stood right here with you 2 years ago, when I was still a candidate for this office. And during that campaign, we talked about how for years the values of hard work and responsibility that had built this country had been given short shrift and how it was slowly hollowing out our middle class. Listen, everybody who has a chair, go ahead and sit down, because everybody's all hollering. Just relax; I'm going to be talking for a while now. Everybody take—[*applause*—]got a lot of hard-working people here; you deserve to sit down for a day. You've been on your feet all year working hard.

But 2 years ago, we talked about some on Wall Street who were taking reckless risks and cutting corners to turn huge profits while working Americans were fighting harder and harder just to stay afloat. We talked about how the decks all too often were stacked in favor of special interests and against the interests of working Americans.

And what we knew even then was that these years would be some of the most difficult in our history. And then 2 weeks later—2 weeks after I spoke here, the bottom fell out of the economy, and middle class families suddenly found themselves swept up in the worst recession of our lifetimes.

So the problems facing working families, they're nothing new. But they are more serious than ever. And that makes our cause more urgent than ever. For generations, it was the great American working class, the great American middle class that made our economy the envy of the world. It's got to be that way again.

Milwaukee, it was folks like you that built this city. It was folks like you that built this State. It was folks like you who forged that middle class all across the Nation.

It was working men and women who made the 20th century the American century. It was the labor movement that helped secure so much of what we take for granted today: the 40-hour work week; the minimum wage; family leave; health insurance; Social Security; Medicare; retirement plans. The cornerstones of the middle class security all bear the union label.

And it was that greatest generation that built America into the greatest force of prosperity and opportunity and freedom that the world has ever known, Americans like my grandfather, who went off to war just boys and then returned home as men, and then they traded in one uniform and set of responsibilities for another. And Americans like my grandmother, who rolled up her sleeves and worked in a factory on the homefront. And when the war was over, they studied under the GI bill, and they bought a home under the FHA, and they raised families supported by good jobs that paid good wages with good benefits.

It was through my grandparents' experience that I was brought up to believe that anything is possible in America. But Milwaukee, they also knew the feeling when opportunity is pulled out from under you. They grew up during the Depression, so they'd tell me about seeing their fathers or their uncles or—losing jobs; how it wasn't just the loss of a paycheck that hurt so bad, it was the blow to their dignity, their sense of self-worth. I'll bet a lot of us have seen people who've been changed after a long bout of unemployment. It can wear you down. Even if you've got a strong spirit, if you're out of work for a long time, it can wear you down.

So my grandparents taught me early on that a job is about more than just a paycheck. The paycheck's important, but a job's about waking up every day with a sense of purpose and going to bed at night feeling like you've handled your responsibilities. It's about meeting your responsibilities to yourself and to your family and to your community. And I carried that lesson with me all those years ago when I got my start fighting for men and women on the south side of Chicago after their local steel plant shut down. And I carried that lesson with me through my time as a State senator and a U.S. Senator, and I carry that lesson with me today.

And I know—I know that there are folks right here in this audience, folks right here in Milwaukee and all across America who are going through these kinds of struggles. Eight million Americans lost their jobs in this recession. And even though we've had 8 straight months of private sector job growth, the new jobs haven't been coming fast enough.

Now, here's the honest truth, the plain truth: There's no silver bullet; there's no quick fix to these problems. I knew when I was running for office, and I certainly knew by the time I was sworn in, I knew it would take time to reverse the damage of a decade worth of policies that saw too few people being able to climb into the middle class, too many people falling behind. We all knew this. We all knew that it would take more time than any of us want to dig ourselves out of this hole created by this economic crisis. But on this Labor Day, there are two things I want you to know.

Number one: I am going to keep fighting every single day, every single hour, every single minute to turn this economy around and put people back to work and renew the American Dream, not just for your family, not just for all our families, but for future generations. That I can guarantee you.

Number two—I believe this with every fiber of my being: America cannot have a strong, growing economy without a strong, growing middle class and the chance for everybody, no matter how humble their beginnings, to join that middle class—[applause]—a middle class

built on the idea that if you work hard, if you live up to your responsibilities, then you can get ahead; that you can enjoy some basic guarantees in life: a good job that pays a good wage; health care that will be there when you get sick; a secure retirement even if you're not rich; an education that will give your children a better life than we had. These are simple ideas. These are American ideas. These are union ideas. That's what we're fighting for.

I was thinking about this last week. I was thinking about this last week on the day I announced the end of our combat mission in Iraq. And I spent some time, as I often do, with our soldiers and our veterans. And this new generation of troops coming home from Iraq, they've earned their place alongside the greatest generation. Just like that greatest generation, they've got the skills, they've got the training, they've got the drive to move America's economy forward once more.

We've been investing in new care and new opportunities and a new commitment to our veterans, because we've got to serve them just the way they served us. But Milwaukee, they're coming home to an economy hit by a recession deeper than anything we've seen since the 1930s. So the question is, how do we create the same kinds of middle class opportunities for this generation as my grandparents' generation came home to? How do we build our economy on that same strong, stable foundation for growth?

Now, anybody who thinks that we can move this economy forward with just a few folks at the top doing well, hoping that it's going to trickle down to working people, who are running faster and faster just to keep up——

Audience member. You'll never see it.

The President. ——you'll never see it. If that's what you're waiting for, you should stop waiting, because it's never happened in our history. That's not how America was built. It wasn't built with a bunch of folks at the top doing well and everybody else scrambling. We didn't become the most prosperous country in the world just by rewarding greed and recklessness. We didn't come this far by letting the special interests run wild. We didn't do it just by gambling and chasing paper profits on Wall Street. We built this country by making things, by producing goods we could sell. We did it with sweat and effort and innovation. We did it on the assembly line and at the construction site. We did it by investing in the people who built this country from the ground up: the workers, middle class families, small-business owners. We outworked folks, and we outeducated folks, and we outcompeted everybody else. That's how we built America.

And Milwaukee, that's what we're going to do again. That's been at the heart of what we've been doing over these last 20 months: building our economy on a new foundation so that our middle class doesn't just survive this crisis, I want it to thrive. I want it to be stronger than it was before.

And over the last 2 years, that's meant taking on some powerful interests—some powerful interests who had been dominating the agenda in Washington for a very long time. And they're not always happy with me. They talk about me like a dog. That's not in my prepared remarks, it's just—[laughter]—but it's true.

You know, that's why we passed financial reform, to provide new accountability and tough oversight of Wall Street, stopping credit card companies from gouging you with hidden fees and unfair rate hikes, ending taxpayer bailouts for—of Wall Street once and for all. They're not happy with it, but it was the right thing to do.

That's why we eliminated tens of billions of dollars in wasteful taxpayer subsidies, handouts to the big banks that were providing student loans. We took that money, tens of billions of dollars, and we're going to go to make sure that your kids and your grandkids can get student loans and grants at a cheap rate and afford a college education. They're not happy with it, but it was the right thing to do. [*Applause*] Yes, we're using those savings to put a college education within reach for working families.

That's why we passed health insurance reform, to make coverage affordable; reform that ends the indignity of insurance companies jacking up your premiums at will, denying you coverage just because you get sick; reform that gives you control, gives you the ability, if your child is sick, to be able to get an affordable insurance plan, making sure they can't drop it.

That's why we're making it easier for workers to save for retirement, with new ways of saving your tax refunds, a simpler system for enrolling in plans like 401(k)s, and fighting to strengthen Social Security for the future. And if everybody is still talking about privatizing Social Security, they need to be clear: It will not happen on my watch, not when I'm President of the United States of America.

That's why we've given tax cuts, except we give them to folks who need them. We've given them to small-business owners. We've given them to clean energy companies. We've cut taxes for 95 percent of working Americans, just like I promised you during the campaign. You all got a tax cut. And instead of giving tax breaks to companies that are shipping jobs overseas, we're cutting taxes to companies that are putting our people to work right here in the United States of America.

See, we want to invest in growth industries like clean energy and manufacturing. You've got leaders here in Wisconsin—Tom Barrett, Jim Doyle—they've been fighting to bring those jobs to Milwaukee, fighting to bring those jobs here to Wisconsin. I don't want to see solar panels and wind turbines and electric cars made in China. I want them made right here in the United States of America.

I don't want to buy stuff from someplace else. I want to grow our exports so that we're selling to someplace else, products that say, "Made in the U.S.A."

Audience members. U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.!

The President. That's right. There are no better workers than American workers. I'll put my money on you any day of the week. And when the naysayers said, well, you can't save the auto industry, just go ahead and let hundreds of thousands of jobs vanish, we said, we're going to stand by those workers. If they're—if the management's willing to make tough choices, if everybody's willing to come together, I'm confident that the American auto industry can compete once again. And today, that industry is on the way back. They said no; we said yes to the American worker. They're coming back.

Now, let me tell you, another thing we've done is to make long-overdue investments in upgrading our outdated, our inefficient national infrastructure. We're talking roads. We're talking bridges. We're talking dams, levees. But we're also talking a smart electric grid that can bring clean energy to new areas. We're talking about broadband Internet so that everybody's plugged in. We're talking about high-speed rail lines required to compete in a 21st-century economy. I want to get down from Milwaukee down to Chicago quick—avoid a traffic jam.

We're talking investments in tomorrow that are creating hundreds of thousands of private sector jobs right now.

Because of these investments and the tens of thousands of projects they spurred all across the country, the battered construction sector actually grew last month for the first time in a very long time.

But, you know, the folks here in the trades know what I'm talking about. Nearly one in five construction workers are unemployed—one in five. Nobody's been hit harder than construction workers. And a lot of those folks, they had lost their jobs in manufacturing and went into construction; now they've lost their jobs again.

It doesn't do anybody any good when so many hard-working Americans have been idled for months, even years, at a time when there's so much of America that needs rebuilding. So that's why, Milwaukee, today I am announcing a new plan for rebuilding and modernizing America's roads and rails and runways for the long term. I want America to have the best infrastructure in the world. We used to have the best infrastructure in the world; we can have it again. We are going to make it happen.

Over the next 6 years, we are going to rebuild 150,000 miles of our roads. That's enough to circle the world six times; that's a lot of road. We're going to lay and maintain 4,000 miles of our railways, enough to stretch coast to coast. We're going to restore 150 miles of runways. And we're going to advance a next-generation air traffic control system to reduce travel time and delays for American travelers. I think everybody can agree on that. Anybody want more delays at airports?

Audience members. No!

The President. No, I didn't think so. That's not a Republican or a Democratic idea. We all want to get to where we need to go. I mean, I've got Air Force One now; it's nice. *[Laughter]* But I still remember what it was like. *[Laughter]*

This is a plan that will be fully paid for. It will not add to the deficit over time; we're going to work with Congress to see to that. We want to set up an infrastructure bank to leverage Federal dollars and focus on the smartest investments. We're going to continue our strategy to build a national high-speed rail network that reduces congestion and travel times and reduces harmful emissions. We want to cut waste and bureaucracy and consolidate and collapse more than 100 different programs that too often duplicate each other. So we want to change the way Washington spends your tax dollars. We want to reform a haphazard, patchwork way of doing business. We want to focus on less wasteful approaches than we've got right now. We want competition and innovation that gives us the best bang for the buck.

But the bottom line is this, Milwaukee: This will not only create jobs immediately, it's also going to make our economy hum over the long haul. It's a plan that history tells us can and should attract bipartisan support. It's a plan that says even in the aftermath of the worst recession in our lifetimes, America can still shape our own destiny. We can still move this country forward. We can still leave our children something better. We can still leave them something that lasts.

So these are the things we've been working for. These are some of the victories you guys have helped us achieve. And we're not finished. We've got a lot more progress to make. And I'm confident we will.

But there are some folks in Washington who see things differently.

Audience members. Boo!

The President. You know what I'm talking about. *[Laughter]* When it comes to just about everything we've done to strengthen our middle class, to rebuild our economy, almost every Republican in Congress says no. Even on things we usually agree on, they say no. If I said the sky was blue, they'd say no. *[Laughter]* If I said fish live in the sea, they'd say no. *[Laughter]* They just think it's better to score political points before an election than to solve problems. So they said no to help for small businesses, even when the small businesses said, we desperately need this. This used to be their key constituency, they said. They said no—no to middle class tax cuts. They say they're for tax cuts; I say, okay, let's give tax cuts to the middle class. "No."*[Laughter]* No to clean energy jobs, no to making college more affordable, no to reforming Wall Street. They're saying right now no to cutting more taxes for small-business owners and helping them get financing.

I—you know, I heard—somebody out here was yelling, "Yes we can." Remember that was our slogan? Their slogan is "No we can't." No, no, no, no. It——

Audience members. Yes we can! Yes we can! Yes we can!

The President. Now, I mean, I personally think "Yes we can" is more inspiring than "No we can't." To steal a line from our old friend Ted Kennedy, what is it about working men and women that they find so offensive? *[Laughter]*

When we passed a bill earlier this summer to help States save jobs, the jobs of hundreds of thousands of teachers and nurses and police officers and firefighters that were about to be laid off, they said no. And the Republican who thinks he's going to take over as Speaker—*[laughter]*——

Audience members. Boo!

The President. ——I'm just saying, that's his opinion. *[Laughter]* He's entitled to his opinion. But when he was asked about this, he dismissed those jobs as "government jobs" that weren't worth saving.

Audience members. Boo!

The President. That's what he said. I'm quoting—"government jobs."

Now, think about this. These are the people who teach our children. These are the people who keep our streets safe. These are the people who put their lives on the line, who rush into a burning building. Government jobs? I don't know about you, but I think those jobs are worth saving. I think those jobs are worth saving.

By the way, this bill that we passed to save all those jobs, we made sure that bill wouldn't add to the deficit. You know how we paid for it? By closing one of these ridiculous tax loopholes that actually rewarded corporations for shipping jobs and profits overseas.

I mean, this was one of those loopholes that allowed companies to write off taxes they paid to foreign governments, even though they weren't paying taxes here in the United States. So middle class families were footing tax breaks for companies creating jobs somewhere else. I mean, even a lot of America's biggest corporations agreed that this loophole didn't make sense, agreed that it needed to be closed, agreed that it wasn't fair. But the man who thinks he's going to be Speaker, he wants to reopen this loophole.

Audience members. Boo!

The President. Look, the bottom line is this: These guys, they just don't want to give up on that economic philosophy that they have been peddling for most of the last decade. You know that philosophy: You cut taxes for millionaires and billionaires, you cut all the rules and regulations for special interests, and then you just cut working folks loose. You cut them loose to fend for themselves.

You remember they called it the "ownership society," but what it really boiled down to was, if you couldn't find a job, you couldn't afford college, you were born poor, your insurance company dropped you even though your kid was sick, that you were on your own.

Well, you know what? That philosophy didn't work out so well for middle class families all across America. It didn't work out so well for our country. All it did was rack up record deficits and result in the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. I mean, think about it. We have tried what they're peddling. We did it for 10 years. We ended up with the worst economy since the 1930s and record deficits to boot. It's not like we haven't tried what they're trying to sell us.

Now, I'm bringing this up not because I'm trying to relitigate the past; I'm bringing it up because I don't want to relive the past.

It'd be one thing, Milwaukee, if Republicans in Washington had some new ideas, if they had said, you know what, we really screwed up, and we've learned from our mistakes; we're going to do things differently this time. That's not what they're doing.

When the leader of their campaign committee was asked on national television what Republicans would do if they took over Congress, you know what he said? He said, "We'll do exactly the same thing we did the last time." That's what he said. It's on tape.

So basically, here's what this election comes down to: They're betting that between now and November, you're going to come down with amnesia. [*Laughter*] They figure you're going to forget what their agenda did to this country. They think you'll just believe that they've changed.

These are the folks whose policies helped devastate our middle class. They drove our economy into a ditch. And we got in there and put on our boots, and we pushed, and we shoved. And we were sweating, and these guys were standing, watching us and sipping on a Slurpee. [*Laughter*] And they were pointing at us saying, "How come you're not pushing harder? How come you're not pushing faster?" And then when we finally got the car up—and it's got a few dings and a few dents, it's got some mud on it; we're going to have to do some work on it—they point to everybody and say, "Look what these guys did to your car"—[*laughter*]—after we got it out of the ditch. And then they got the nerve to ask for the keys back. [*Laughter*] I don't want to give them the keys back. They don't know how to drive.

I mean, I want everybody to think about it here. When you want to go forward in your car, what do you do?

Audience members. "D!"

The President. You put it in "D." They're going to pop it in reverse. [*Laughter*] They'd have those special interests riding shotgun, then they'd hit the gas, and we'd be right back in the ditch. [*Laughter*]

Milwaukee, we are not going backwards. That's the choice we face this fall. Do we want to go back, or do we want to go forward?

Audience members. Forward!

The President. I say we want to move forward. America always moves forward. We keep moving forward every day.

Let me say this, Milwaukee. I know these are difficult times. I know folks are worried. I know there's still a lot of hurt out there. I hear it when I travel around the country. I see it in the letters that I read every night from folks who are looking for a job or lost their home. It breaks my heart, because those are the folks that I got into politics for. You're the reason I'm here.

And when times are tough, I know it can be easy to give in to cynicism, I know it can be easy to give in to fear and doubt. And you know, it's easy sometimes for folks to stir up stuff and turn people on each other, and it's easy to settle for something less, to set our sights a little bit lower.

But I just want everybody here to remember, that's not who we are. That's not the country I know. We do not give up. We do not quit. We face down war. We face down depression. We face down great challenges and great threats. We have lit the way for the rest of the world.

Whenever times have seemed at their worst, Americans have been at their best. That's when we roll up our sleeves. That's when we remember we rise or fall together, as one nation and as one people. That's the spirit that started the labor movement, the idea that alone, we may be weak; divided, we may fall; but we are united, we are strong. That's why they call them unions. That's why we call this the United States of America.

I'm going to make this case across the country between now and November. I am asking for your help. And if you are willing to join me and Tom Barrett and Gwen Moore and Russ Feingold and Herb Kohl, we can strengthen our middle class and make this economy work for all Americans again and restore the American Dream and give it to our children and our grandchildren.

God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:11 p.m. at Henry W. Maier Festival Park. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. James E. Doyle, Jr., of Wisconsin; House Minority Leader John A. Boehner; and Rep. Pete Sessions.

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Locations: Milwaukee, WI.

Names: Barrett, Thomas M.; Boehner, John A.; Cochran, Shiela D.; Doyle, James E., Jr.; Feingold, Russell D.; Kohl, Herbert H.; LaHood, Ray H.; Moore, Gwendolynne S.; Newby, David; Sessions, Pete; Solis, Hilda L.; Trumka, Richard L.

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Business and industry : Manufacturing industry :: Strengthening efforts; Commerce, international : U.S. exports :: Expansion; Congress : Bipartisanship; Economy, national : Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act; Economy, national : Recession, effects; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts ; Education : Postsecondary education :: Affordability; Education : Postsecondary education :: Student loans, elimination of subsidies to private providers; Education jobs and State funding assistance legislation; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth ; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Employment and unemployment : Job losses; Employment and unemployment : Outsourcing to foreign countries; Energy : Alternative and renewable sources and technologies; Energy : Alternative energy products and technologies, U.S. production; Energy : Battery technology for hybrid automobiles; Energy : Infrastructure and grid improvements; Energy : Solar and wind energy; Health and medical care : Cost control reforms; Health and medical care : Health insurance reforms; Health and medical care : Insurance coverage and access to providers; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Labor, Department of : Secretary; Science and technology : Broadband technology; Social Security and retirement : Retirement accounts :: 401(k), 403(b), and IRA accounts; Social Security and retirement : Social Security personal retirement accounts, proposed; Social Security and retirement : Social Security program; Social Security and retirement: Retirement accounts :: Federal tax refunds, direct deposit into; Taxation : Tax Code :: Reform; Taxation : Tax relief; Transportation : High-speed rail lines, development and expansion; Transportation : Highway system, modernization efforts; Transportation, Department of : Infrastructure innovation and finance fund, proposed; Transportation, Department of : Secretary; Veterans : Benefits; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Education and job training assistance; Wisconsin : Laborfest in Milwaukee; Wisconsin : President's visits; Worker, Homeownership, and Business Assistance Act of 2009.

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